

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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VDH 05-05

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**VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH TO DISTRIBUTE
FOLIC ACID TO PATIENTS IN SOME DISTRICTS**

(RICHMOND, Va.)—Beginning in July, the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) will offer free folic acid supplements to family planning patients in 19 of its health districts. Studies have shown that daily consumption of 400 micrograms of the B vitamin folic acid can reduce the risk of birth defects of the brain and spine such as spina bifida and anencephaly, the two most common neural tube birth defects, by as much as 70 percent.

Authors of a recent article in the American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology estimate that women receive only about 25 percent of the recommended daily dosage of folic acid from their diet, even when it is balanced and includes grains fortified with folic acid.

“These birth defects can occur during the first month of pregnancy when most women would not even know they are expecting,” said State Health Commissioner, Robert B. Stroube, M.D., M.P.H. “That is why it is important for women who may become pregnant to take folic acid regularly.”

Approximately 43,000 women, or 59 percent of VDH’s family planning patients, are expected to receive the supplement during the two-year program.

“Research has shown that women are more likely to take folic acid when a physician or allied health professional recommends it,” said Kathy Orchen, coordinator of VDH’s folic acid distribution project. “We are using the two most effective ways to increase the use of folic acid—providing advice from a health care provider and distributing the supplement directly to clients.”

The program is targeting 19 health districts to participate in the distribution program that had spina bifida birth rates of at least 5.24 per 10,000 live births. Districts whose family planning clients were at least 29 percent Hispanic were also chosen, as several studies have shown that the Hispanic population experiences higher rates of neural tube birth defects.

Approximately 40 children are born each year in Virginia with spina bifida. Spina bifida is caused when a baby’s spine does not close properly. Approximately 10 children are born in the state with anencephaly, which occurs when the brain does not form properly.

Women can get the recommended daily amount of 400 micrograms of folic acid by taking a folic acid supplement, a multivitamin and by increasing their consumption of foods fortified with folic acid. Foods high in folic acid include enriched cereal, bread, rice, pasta, and other grain products. Foods that naturally contain folic acid include orange juice, dried beans, lentils, spinach, asparagus and leafy green vegetables.

(more)

For more information on folic acid and how it can prevent birth defects, visit <http://www.vahealth.org/wic/folicacid.htm>.

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Editors Note:

The following health districts were chosen for the folic acid distribution program due to their increased rates of spina bifida. They are listed with their spina bifida birth rates per 10,000 live births.

<u>DISTRICT</u>	<u>SPINA BIFIDA RATE</u>
Central Virginia	6.91
Cumberland	6.66
Eastern Shore	6.66
Lord Fairfax	5.34
Mount Rogers	5.50
New River	6.59
Piedmont	5.54
Pittsylvania/ Danville	5.24
Rappahannock	6.15
Rappahannock/ Rapidan	7.91
Southside	6.86
West Piedmont	5.92

The following health districts were chosen for the program because their family planning clients are at least 29 percent Hispanic:

Alexandria
Arlington
Chesterfield
Fairfax
Henrico
Loudoun
Prince William

For a map showing the location of these health districts, visit www.vdh.virginia.gov and click on "Local Health Districts"